Interview with Thomas R. Donahue

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THOMAS R. DONAHUE

Interviewer: James F. Shea and Don R. Kienzle

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Shea: Good afternoon. I am Jim Shea. It's the afternoon of April 9, 1997, and we are here in the office of Tom Donahue, the former President [and earlier Secretary-Treasurer] of the AFL- CIO [American Federation of Labor-Committee for Industrial Organization], who is now working for the Center for Dispute Resolution. Tom, can we ask you to tell us a little about your background, especially your connections with international labor.

DONAHUE: Sure. I have worked in the labor movement since 1948 and became involved relatively early on with the Labor Attach# Program and with people who worked in international affairs, because I spent three years, from 1957 to 1960, working in Paris. I worked for Radio Free Europe and the Free Europe Committee in Paris and consequently came to have an interest in what was going on in the international labor world and in the Labor Attach# Program.

In my early years in the movement, I knew lots of people, many of them were just names to me but they were names of some reputation, who were going into the labor attach# field in the late 1940s and 1950s. Then, through the years, working for the Service Employees

International Union (SEIU) and later for the Federation (AFL-CIO), I had a lot of ongoing contact with people who worked in the Labor Attach# Corps all around the world. I have always been interested in it, and I have always lamented the fact that it has by now become a fully career Foreign Service group of people. I thought that the early concept of the program of drawing from the labor movement people who had experience in labor was a sound concept. I wished always that that system of the Reserve [Foreign Service] Officer could have continued. It is obviously impractical for a lot of other reasons, but it had great virtues in putting into the Labor Attach# Program, as it did in those early years, a group of people who were already knowledgeable about the labor movement in the United States and consequently had some standard or a sense of the mission of the labor movement by which they could judge what was going on in the labor movements of foreign countries.

Kienzle: Were you involved in the early years in assignments of people from the labor movement into the Labor Attach# Program?

DONAHUE: No. I didn't go to the AFL-CIO until 1973, and my early career was with the Service Employees Union. George Meany didn't ask other people outside the AFL-CIO to comment on the assignments. But I knew a number of the labor attach#s, and since I was very young when I started working in 1948, these people were largely my heroes. They were people whom I looked up to. In reviewing the list of people you have interviewed, I see a number of names there from the earliest years of the program of people for whom I had enormous respect.

Shea: Who was the Labor Attach# in Paris at that time?

DONAHUE: When I was there in 1957 I think it was Dan Horowitz. At that point he had an assistant. I can't remember what his name was.

Shea: Did you travel to Italy during those years and did you know Tom Lane at that time?

DONAHUE: I did. My role in Radio Free Europe and the Free Europe Committee was as the program officer and liaison officer for the Eastern European and Central European unions in exile. They had a headquarters in Paris. The Force Ouvri#re had given them space in their offices on Avenue du Maine in Paris, and the International Center of Free Trade Unionists in Exile, ICFTUE, existed at that point. I worked with all of those Central European exiles and consequently traveled all over Western Europe and was in contact with a number of labor attach#s who worked in the area.

Kienzle: Paul Bergman would have been the Assistant Labor Attach# in Paris at that time.

DONAHUE: Paul Bergman, right.

Kienzle: Could you describe in a little more detail your work with Radio Free Europe, because that certainly is relevant to the international labor function.

DONAHUE: The International Center of Free Trade Unionists in Exile had been established, I guess, sometime in the early 1950s, in 1952 or 1953, with the assistance of the ICFTU and Force Ouvri#re, and the people who had made it up were the national representatives of each of the countries in exile. It had its headquarters in Paris. The president of it was a man named Francisek Bialas, who had been the leader of the social security workers in Poland during the pre-war period and immediately after World War II. The Secretary-Treasurer was a man named Arno Heis, who was a Czechoslovak trade unionist living in exile. Essentially the Free Europe Committee provided financial support to the ICFTUE to enable them to publish their national journals, which they did and to publish trade union studies of conditions in their home countries and to publicize those conditions in the West. Consequently, I had ongoing contact every couple of days or every week with these people and with their programs. Additionally, I served as a kind of liaison between the Free Europe Committee and the ICFTU, the exile organizations and the AFL-CIO. So I used to travel up to Brussels frequently and meet with Mr. Oldenbroek at that time and then with his successor.

Shea: Was that Otto Kersten?

DONAHUE: It was before Kersten. It was Oldenbroek, I guess. It was probably Oldenbroek all the while. He and Bialas were great buddies. He had great respect for Bialas. It's funny I just came from the memorial service for Al Shanker, [the late President of the American Federation of Teachers], where I saw Stefan Nejinski and we were talking about those early years. I remember Bialas always used to say to me, “Do you know Stefan Nejinski?” And I said, “No, I don't.” Stefan had just then been appointed an Assistant Secretary of the PTTI [Postal, Telegraph and Telephone International]. He said, “He's a splendid man, splendid man.” I never see Stefan that I don't think of “splendid man.” He drummed it into me. “He was a splendid man.” He was a fellow Pole obviously.

Kienzle: Who funded the Free Europe Committee?

DONAHUE: In those years, we said it was funded by “your truth dollars.” The advertisement for Radio Free Europe was, “Your dollar buys a minute of truth behind the Iron Curtain.” In more recent years, it has been revealed that there was government funding. It was CIA funding—or supplemental funding—for the Free Europe Committee.

Kienzle: Was that a private organization?

DONAHUE: Oh, it was a totally private organization.

Kienzle: It wasn't connected with the ICFTU?

DONAHUE: No. It was a private American organization, which was the official sponsor of Radio Free Europe. It had three divisions: Radio Free Europe, Free Europe Press, which was producing printed materials for dissemination behind the Iron Curtain, and the Free Europe Exile Relations Division, which was where I worked and where we funded and assisted exile organizations to put them in contact with their counterparts in the Western world and to enable them to tell their story in the Western world.

Kienzle: Was Irving Brown involved?

DONAHUE: Irving was in Paris in those days, and of course I went to see Irving quite frequently and chatted with him. It seems to me that during that time, probably sometime in 1958 or 1959, Irving came back to the United States and was in New York setting up the African-American Labor Center and representing the AFL-CIO at the UN. Mel Pitzele's son came over and ran the office in Paris for a year or so. He worked with Irving. But, yes, I used to see Irving frequently and talk with him about the things we were doing. I just finished reading a book, which Ben Rathbun has produced on Irving Brown, called, “The Point Man.”

Kienzle: Care to comment on what you think of the book?

DONAHUE: It's a contribution to the literature in the field. Ben is a good friend. I think it's a worthwhile contribution. It will provide some information that was not previously available, since Irving was one of the most secretive of men. And it does give a decent appreciation of his life and his contribution.

Kienzle: Which was?

DONAHUE: Which I think was enormous.

Kienzle: What about your evaluation of the work of the Free Europe Committee in historical perspective?

DONAHUE: I think for that time it was indispensable. Just as I think the work of the Congress of Cultural Freedom and other organizations that operated in that milieu was important for that time. Later revelations that this was somehow CIA financed does not bother me a bit. I think that, as citizens, this was the best money we ever spent. It has become fashionable in later years to somehow be critical of the Cold War. I don't think the United States created the Cold War. World conditions did that for us, and I think that our

efforts in that Cold War were obviously successful, so I think we ought to be proud of it instead of debunking continually the people who were variously engaged in what are now dismissed as “anti-Communist initiatives.” I think that the creation of the assistance that the AFL and the CIO gave, the assistance that the Free Europe Committee and others gave to the Free Trade Unionists in Exile was critically important in keeping the hopes of workers in those countries alive. I think the contribution of Radio Free Europe to the Cold War, if you will, was enormous and delivered minutes of truth behind the Iron Curtain that kept people informed about what was going on in the Western World, and one of the effects of the work of Trade Unionists in Exile and other groups in exile, the national representations in exile, was to keep alive in the Western World the plight of those nations and to ensure that people growing up in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, understood what had happened in Central Europe and understood the consequences that had flowed inevitably from a Communist takeover. So I am very proud of the work that our nation did in those years and of all of the various pieces of our national effort.

Kienzle: Did you serve at any other time abroad?

DONAHUE: No.

Kienzle: That was your one living experience abroad?

DONAHUE: Yes, I arrived in Paris in late 1956 and I came home in May 1960.

Kienzle: Could you tell us how you were selected for the position?

DONAHUE: That is interesting. I had worked for seven years in a local union in New York City, Local 32B of the Service Employees [International] Union. I had gone to law school at night while I was in the local. I graduated from law school. The future as I perceived it in the local union was not very promising. By that time, I was the contract director of the union and negotiated the [collective bargaining] agreements, but there were four officers

above me, who were about 15 years older than I was and I was about 30. I didn't see that I was going to make any progress staying in that local union.

Shea: Did Dave Sullivan head up the local?

DONAHUE: Dave Sullivan was the President of Local 32B then and was my mentor in the trade union and remains my hero in the trade union movement. He was an Irish immigrant, who came here in 1926 and was an elevator operator at the start and became active in the union. He then led the reform faction in the union to oust a racket dominated leadership in 1940-41. In any case, I had spent seven years in the local and it did not seem to me that there was much of a career path there for me. I was then offered a job in New York by Ed McHale, who was the labor officer of the Free Europe Exile Relations Division of the Free Europe Committee.

Kienzle: Ed McHale later served as Labor Attach# in Australia.

DONAHUE: That's right! He was later a labor attach# and his brother Bill was also a friend of mine. So Ed convinced me I should come to work at the Free Europe Committee. I was there about six months and an opening came up in the Paris office. Jim McCargar, who was then the Director of the Paris office, was in New York; I worked for him a bit there and he asked me if I was interested in going to Paris. It turned out that at that point in my life I was, so I went to Paris. I did the labor [portfolio] in Paris. Ed McHale did it in the New York office.

Kienzle: Could we backtrack just a bit and get some background on your family, your education, how you got involved in the labor movement? Especially how you got into Local 32B, which is, I guess, very famous?

DONAHUE: I don't come from a trade union family. My father was not significantly involved with unions, although he was a member of the Operating Engineers Union for many years during World War II. He was a maintenance man in construction, and then later he was a

member of what was the old Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee of the CIO, when he worked as a deck hand on the Staten Island ferry. He retired from that job eventually.

I went to school in New York to Mount St. Michael and then to Manhattan College. I think my early interest in the trade union movement was sparked by two people—by a Christian brother, Brother Cornelius Justin, who taught at Manhattan College and was the initiator of Manhattan College's major in labor-management relations. Manhattan College was the first Catholic college in the country that offered a full major in labor-management relations. He and another man, a man named George Donahue, who is no relation of mine, but who was then the President of the National Association of Catholic Trade Unions and was a principal organizer in the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and then later in the Retail Clerks' Union. He ran the organizing drive for the Retail Clerks' Union in the New York department stores in 1948-49. While I was in college, I was hired by George Donahue in the Retail Clerks' Union to work part- time as an organizer in their drives in Stern's, Bloomingdale's and Gertz in Jamaica, three department stores in New York. In the first two, the effort was to oust what was then the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union, which had been expelled from the CIO as a Communist dominated union. The Retail Clerks' Union, trying to take advantage of that, came in and raided them at Stern's and at Bloomingdale's and tried to supplant them. We lost in both campaigns, which taught me something: However Communist dominated any union might be, if it was delivering benefits to the people, that was what the people wanted the union to provide.

Kienzle: American pragmatism at work!

DONAHUE: That's right. And at the same time, I worked for two years as an elevator operator at the Best and Company department store. Local 32B came along and ran an organizing campaign at Best and Company. I helped organize in that campaign; we lost the election; but when I graduated about two months later, Local 32B offered me a job to do some education and training work and to edit a magazine that they published and to

be the odd man around the office. So I went to work there full-time in 1949. I went to New York University Graduate School for a couple years, where I studied labor economics. Then I did my degree at Fordham in law. I guess the early influences were Brother Justin and George Donahue, and later Dave Sullivan.

I remember graduating from Manhattan College and I had just gotten a job with Local 32B and I was going to be paid $50 a week. I thought that was a wonderful salary. Management trainees in those years were getting paid $60 or $65 a week, but $50 a week was a very big deal. I remember thinking if I could ever rise to a position as high as George Donahue's and make the $8,000 a year that he made, I would be in fat city for the rest of my life. Well, economics changed a good deal, and I got lucky as I went along!

Shea: Were your parents native New Yorkers?

DONAHUE: Yes, both of them. My grandfather and grandmother were both born in Ireland. My grandfather came in 1850; and my grandmother came in 1870. My grandfather was originally a farmer in upstate New York, and then he moved to the city in 1870 or 1872 and became a New York City cop and retired from the New York City Police Force in 1910 or 1911. So we have been New Yorkers for at least those two generations.

Kienzle: And after you returned from Paris?

DONAHUE: I came back from Paris in 1960. Dave Sullivan, whom I mentioned and who was the president of my local union, was at that time just about to be elected president of the national union, and he asked me to come back to work for him as his executive assistant in the national office. I did that very happily. Then we moved the national office from New York to Washington in 1963. It was then known as BSEIU because it was the Building Service Employees International Union. We “dropped the building,” as they say, sometime in the late 1960s.

Shea: Dave Sullivan was on the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO. That's where I met him.

DONAHUE: That's right. He became president of the national union in 1960, and then around 1964 or 1965 he was elected to the AFL-CIO Executive Council and retired then in 1971. I worked for him for most of those years. In late 1966 George Meany asked me if I would be interested in going into the Labor Department as Assistant Secretary for Labor-Management Relations and said that he was prepared to recommend me to President Johnson, if I was interested in that position. I took a long time thinking about it and told him, “Yes, I would be.”

Kienzle: Was it a hard decision for you to make?

DONAHUE: As I look back on it now, I think, “How could that have been a hard decision?” but at the time it was. I was then the Executive Assistant to the President of the Service Employees Union, and I thought that I had a future in the union. I was not sure what going into the government for two years would do for me. Two years or six years. As it turned out, it was two years. But I finally decided I should do it. President Johnson nominated me then in January of 1967 and I served for two years until the expiration of that administration in January of 1969. At the end of that time, I went back to the Service Employees Union as Executive Secretary, which was a title that they created for me, and I served in that capacity until 1971, when Sullivan retired. I was then elected First Vice-President of the union and I was re-elected at the 1972 convention. Then in the middle of 1973, George Meany asked me if I would come over to the AFL-CIO and work for him as his Executive Assistant, and I did happily. Meany was such a giant of a man and somebody I had such enormous respect for. He was then 79 years old in 1973. Consequently, I used to joke that I did not think it was a job that had a lot of job security, but I thought that the experience of working for him, even for two years, would be so significant that I wanted to do it. As it turned out, he stayed on for six more years, and I worked for him as his Executive Assistant for all of those years. Then in 1979 when he

retired, Lane Kirkland moved up from Secretary-Treasurer, and I ran for the Secretary-Treasurer's job and was elected in 1979. I was re-elected every two years since and last elected at the 1993 convention for the term from 1993 to 1995. When Lane retired in August of 1995, I became President. I was elected President by the Council. Then I ran for re-election at the October 1995 Convention. I lost. I lost with a great deal of dignity, I want you to know, but I lost!

Kienzle: Very memorable race!

DONAHUE: Yes, indeed. And I lost. Sweeney had about 54 percent of the vote and I had about 46 percent. It was a credible showing. Truth is I had more than twice as many unions supporting me as he did, but he had the bigger unions, and the vote is based upon that, so I lost. Thus ended my AFL-CIO career.

Kienzle: Can we backtrack and discuss some of the times when you were involved in international labor activities? Were you involved in your BSEIU or SEIU days?

DONAHUE: In the BSEIU or SEIU days, not very much really. Certainly not when I was in the local in New York. Now after I had spent three years in Europe in between, when I came to the national union, I was somewhat involved and was anxious at that point to affiliate our national union with a trade secretariat. We were not quite sure where we fit, because service unions were not very important in the world of the international trade secretariats (ITS) at that point. In fact, the SEIU didn't affiliate until sometime in the early 1970s. I can't think what the proper name of the secretariat was. It was originally called the Chemical and something or other workers and was one of the predecessors of what is now the ICEF [International Federation of Chemical, Energy, and General Workers Unions]. It was run by a guy from Canada whom we both know.

Shea: Oh, was that Levinson?

DONAHUE: Levinson! Right! He was a guy with a fair imagination and a good sense about him. Levinson saw the prospect for growth among service employees internationally and the need to bring them around. He tried to create a subsection within that ITS. It never really worked out, and eventually they all joined what is now FIET, the International Federation of [Commercial, Clerical and Technical] Employees. It's the white-collar ITS.Shea: That's the one that the United Food and Commercial Workers is affiliated with. Dan Gallin.

DONAHUE: No, that's the IUF [International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Federation]. It was FIET.

Shea: Didn't they have a German named Eric Kissel at one time?

DONAHUE: Yes. Dan Gallin is with the Food Workers Secretariat.

Shea: He's the Romanian.

DONAHUE: Anyway, during the years that I was back at the Service Employees International Union, we had some contact with the labor attach#s who would come in with foreign visitors and so forth, and I tried to keep contact with some of the labor attach#s whom I had known in Europe. Then when I went to the Labor Department, that was not an area of my responsibility—it was George Weaver's—but I kept up with it and worked with George on a number of things.

Earlier I told you the story about Irwin Lippe, because my one fear was that George Meany was going to find out that [American Ambassador to France] Sarge Shriver was inviting the Communist CGT [Conf#d#ration G#n#ral du Travail] to the Embassy Fourth of July party and the world was going to fall apart! That had never happened. The Embassy had never recognized the existence of the CGT prior to that, and I think in fact Shriver was probably dissuaded from doing it that year, but it sooner or later came to be.

Shea: Tom, was Vic Reuther doing any work for the CIO in those years?

DONAHUE: He was, but I never knew Victor in those years. This was in the years prior to 1955. The CIO and the AFL were working in their own backyards, and I never knew Victor Reuther at all in that context. It was only when I went to work for the AFL-CIO that I came to know Mike Ross. Mike had been the International Affairs Director of the CIO, and then after the merger, Mike was the head of the International Affairs Department at the AFL-CIO, the combined Federation. But Victor was still doing his business at the UAW, and that really was separate.

Shea: And you knew Phil Delaney, of course?

DONAHUE: Sure, Phil Delaney I knew well. Phil Delaney was, of course, a great friend and favorite of George Meany's, and that relationship went very far back.

Kienzle: When you worked for George Meany, were you involved in international activities?

DONAHUE: Only peripherally. There was the International Affairs Department. First, Mike Ross, then Jay Lovestone, and then Ernie Lee were the three directors, in that order. But I obviously kept up with what they were doing, because whatever was coming to Meany was coming through me. So I tried to stay abreast of everything that was going on in the international world.

Kienzle: Could you give us a sense of the role of each of those three individuals?

DONAHUE: Yes. Mike Ross is the hardest of the three for me to assess, because I knew him least well in terms of his substantive role in the Federation. He was very well-respected.

Shea: He was a native of Scotland, wasn't he?

DONAHUE: Yes, he was, I guess, and was a guy who had people's respect as a serious trade unionist and a serious internationalist. Jay Lovestone was, of course, a much more controversial figure, and he brought with him everywhere he went both the advantages and disadvantages of his past. I found Jay to be brilliant. He was brittle, of course. He was enormously thoughtful, and he was one of the most energetic people I have ever known in terms of his concern and his focus on international labor affairs. Ernie followed Jay, and that was a tough act to follow. Ernie had worked for Jay in the Department for a number of years, but Ernie's role was different. The times were different. Ernie, I guess, became head of the Department in 1975 or 1976. So it was after much of the Cold War era had gone by. Meany's fights in the ICFTU were long past by that time. We were indeed out of the ICFTU. I don't remember which year it was that the AFL-CIO left the ICFTU, probably in the late 1960s or very early 1970s. The AFL-CIO only went back when Lane Kirkland became President. I guess we reaffiliated in 1980 or 1981.

Shea: Andy McClellan was there, too?

DONAHUE: Andy was there in the International Affairs Department, yes, and was the AFL-CIO representative for Latin America.

Kienzle: There was also the withdrawal from the ILO.

DONAHUE: Which was the mid-1970s, probably in 1974 or 1975.

Kienzle: I think the actual date was probably 1977. There was a two year waiting period.

DONAHUE: Okay. See I tend to associate it with Dunlop, but you're right. Dunlop was Secretary of Labor up to sometime in 1975, and I guess the fight started while he was there, because it was a struggle then to force the accountability of the ILO. You're right, there was a two year period of watching and waiting and then we finally disaffiliated or abandoned it.

Kienzle: I gather that Mr. Meany was very intent on leaving the ILO at that time?

DONAHUE: Yes. Meany was very strong on leaving.

Meany was clearly one of the two or three best minds I have ever known in my lifetime. Working for him was a privilege. And while his formal training ended, I assume, someplace in high school—I never did know that exactly, but I expect in the early high school years—he clearly was one of the most brilliant people I ever met. He had a mind like a steel trap. He loved to do mathematics and he would do mental arithmetic.

Shea: His memory was unbelievable.

DONAHUE: He was very impressed because I could do a lot of mental arithmetic with him and that was only because my mother had been a mathematician type and had always drummed mental arithmetic into all of us. Meany was formidable in terms of his mind in mathematics, but even more formidable in terms of his politics and philosophy and so forth. And he was a man of very strong and determined convictions. When he became convinced that the ICFTU was not doing what it should do and was not using funds as he thought the ICFTU should be using them—at the time there was a scandal in the ICFTU finances in Geneva—Meany said, “That's it. I'm walking away,” and we left the ICFTU. In the ILO, similarly, he became frustrated with a lack of action and with a lack of willingness to confront some of the problems of the ILO, so he was, you would have to say, the driving force behind the decision to pull out of the ILO for that period of time, in the hope that he would make it better. He never left the ICFTU or the ILO in the belief that they would somehow go away and we would function on our own. He saw it only as a pressure tactic to make them better institutions. He was firmly committed to the ICFTU. He had been one of the prime movers at its founding and he certainly inherited from Gompers the tradition of the ILO and wanted to see it improved and thought this was the way to do it. I think history has proven him right, probably on both counts!

Kienzle: He seemed to have taken a personal interest in a lot of the international issues.

DONAHUE: Yes. Meany always did. There are some who say that in his early years in the Federation he was frustrated by [President] Green in terms of some of the domestic activities of the AFL and that therefore he developed the interest in international affairs as a natural arena in which he could work. That may be partly true. Meany never said that. Meany always said that his interest in international affairs and in international trade unions was awakened by David Dubinsky and Matt Woll, and he always credited Woll and Dubinsky with raising his consciousness in the 1939, 1940, 1941 period with what was happening to trade unionists abroad. That awakened in him an interest and a conviction in the need to develop an effective international trade union movement. All the while we were in the ICFTU, Meany always attended every ICFTU meeting. I remember that when I was in Paris, I used to go up to Brussels for the ICFTU meetings, and I would see Meany then. And he always took a fair-sized delegation of other presidents [of AFL-CIO member unions] with him. We had a very important presence in the ICFTU in those years. Now in more recent years that presence has fallen on a much smaller group of people. It's the President—Lane Kirkland always went to the ICFTU—and maybe one or two Vice Presidents [of the AFL-CIO], and a lot of staff people from the [AFL-CIO labor assistance] institutes and from the International Affairs Department. I guess maybe this change is because the ICFTU has become a more complicated institution, and you need more specialized knowledge. But that is unfortunate, because it means there are fewer AFL-CIO Vice Presidents or members of the Executive Council who participate in the ICFTU and in the ILO. As you well know, it has always been hard to get the leadership to go to the ILO because of the length of the sessions. It is difficult for them to be away for three or four weeks at a time.

Shea: When I worked in the Latin American Bureau [of the Department of State], Meany used to go to the ORIT [Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers] Executive Board meetings, and I can tell you he made an impact.

DONAHUE: That was particularly true in the years when we were out of the ICFTU, because the ORIT became the substitute vehicle for the expression of our interests in international affairs. The ICFTU had a lot of indigestion over that fact. That's when questions [arose as to] what exactly is the ORIT. Is it a creature of the ICFTU or is it not? That question persists down to this day. We all believe that on paper it is a regional organization of the ICFTU, but. . .

Kienzle: In practice it's taken on it's own agenda.

DONAHUE: Yes.

Shea: Two vice presidents of the AFL-CIO who were very active were Joe Beirne and Bill Doherty, Senior.

Kienzle: Also, Al Shanker.

Shea: Oh, in later years, Shanker.

DONAHUE: Shanker and Jack Joyce. Jay Mazur to some extent.

Shea: Joe Keenan.

DONAHUE: Yes.

Shea: There was someone from the Theatrical [Workers Union]. Wasn't Walsh his name?

DONAHUE: Oh, Dick Walsh, yes.

Kienzle: Could you perhaps give us some background on how Jay Lovestone was selected to be head of the AFL-CIO International Department?

DONAHUE: No, only because I don't know any of the background. I know that it was announced that Jay was to head the Department. I guess I may have misstated this.

It may be that Jay was already the Director of International Affairs before I went to the Federation [AFL- CIO]. I knew Mike Ross when I was here in town with the SEIU, but Ross might have died before 1973 when I went to the Federation.

Shea: I would say so, Tom.

DONAHUE: I think so. I think Ross died and Jay was then the ranking man behind him or the ranking person in the field. Jay was then in New York at the ILG [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union]. Meany and Dubinsky were “a pair” in international affairs and out of that relationship Meany had enormous respect for Jay.

Kienzle: It appears that the ILG also played a very special role in the internal [deliberations of the AFL-CIO on international labor issues.]

DONAHUE: Dubinsky, as the personification of the ILG, played an important role because Dubinsky was an internationalist and was very involved. Meany always said that it was Dubinsky who introduced him to concerns in this area. I misspoke earlier when I said it was in 1939 and 1940; it was indeed in 1933, when Meany was still in New York, and was the President of the New York State Federation of Labor, that Dubinsky, Matt Woll, and others formed the Free Trade Union Committee to assist the German trade unionists who were either being expelled or arrested in the wake of Hitler's coming to power in 1933. Meany said it was from that that his interest in international affairs grew. And Dubinsky was his mentor, always.

Shea: Also the ILG had a very large segment of Italians headed, I think, by Luigi Antonini.

DONAHUE: Luigi Antonini, yes. Well, as Jay Mazur said today at the memorial service for Al Shanker, the ILG has always been an immigrants' union. In those years, it was largely a Jewish Central or Eastern European union and Italian union. Almost half of its membership, as I recall, was Italian. (End of Tape I, Side A)

Kienzle: Shall we turn to the period when you were Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, and could you describe the international affairs mechanism, who was responsible for what and what the chain of command was?

DONAHUE: Sure. For the first year or two, Ernie Lee continued as Director of the International Affairs Department. Then he retired and Lane appointed Irving Brown as Director of the International Affairs Department. Truth is, in terms of the international operations of the AFL- CIO, Irving had always been the Co-Director of International Affairs in that George Meany always talked to Irving and Lane Kirkland always talked to Irving about international issues, so both Lane and I took a hand in persuading Irving that he should take the job. He did not want to become the Director of International Affairs, but Lane assured him that he could stay in Paris for a while and he could commute and we could work this out. He then became in fact as well as in deed the Director of International Affairs, and then after Irving, Tom Kahn was the Director. In those years, in 1979, 1980, and 1981, we were certainly engaged most heavily in Central and Eastern Europe and in Poland with aid to Solidarnosc, and both Irving and Tom Kahn in his time were heavily committed in terms of their energies and our resources in providing assistance to Solidarnosc and later to Solidarnosc the union after it came out from under ground.

Lane also believed, and acted on that belief, to take the AFL-CIO back into the ICFTU at the first opportunity. As I recall, it was 1980 or 1981 that we reaffiliated and began to play a really serious role in the ICFTU's substantive programs. There were always difficulties with the ICFTU in terms of the coordination of assistance programs in other countries. There were always the petty jealousies and the competition between German and U.S. assistance, and to a lesser extent, with the Brits, the Canadians, the French, and everybody else. And there were always lots of concerns about sharing information and deciding which unions in which countries were worthy of support. Clearly the AFL-CIO had different views on that than some of the other affiliates in the ICFTU had, and in those cases we each went our own way and supported the unions which we thought

held the most promise for democratic reform in a country. I'm thinking of Chile particularly and others. But Lane's conviction was that we had to play a major role in the ICFTU and that we could not complain about its policies if we were not there paying the freight and playing our role. That's why he took so much of his own time to participate in the ICFTU board meetings and to participate in the ILO as well. He believed in the force of the ILO and in the long-term effect that it could have in reforming countries on issues of freedom of association, worker rights, and child labor laws. I think I was always a little less patient with the ILO than he was. I saw the several years it took to get something done as rather frustrating. He was more patient with it because he understood the machinery closer up. I was never primarily involved in the ILO issues.

In terms of the International Affairs Department in those years, it was very much an activist department and Lane and the Federation were very involved in support of democratic forces, wherever we could find them, and that included South Africa. There were, I think, some missteps in South Africa in terms of where we were going, but they were well-intentioned missteps. There were questions of judgment about from which quarter a democratic force was going to emerge in the post-apartheid South Africa. But those were years in which the Federation spent a good bit of its substance and the time of its officers in international affairs in what I believe was the most selfless fashion trying to assist workers abroad. I'm always irritated when I hear people whom I have to regard as “know-nothings” arguing that the Federation should not be using government money to support programs abroad or what not. I just think that's the absolute nadir of know-nothingism. Lane always used to argue quite publicly, and I'm sure he still would make the same argument, that there could be no better use of taxpayer money abroad than spending it to develop free trade unions for workers in other countries. And if we could get $2 million or $10 million from the government to do that, we ought to grab every penny we could get and spend it properly, because if we did not, the business forces would spend it in some other way. That's obviously the correct view. But I say, those were years when we were heavily engaged with democratic trade union forces throughout the developing world and

in the then- Communist world. Kienzle: What about worker rights provisions in the trade legislation? How did you see those fitting in with the ILO mechanism?

DONAHUE: They were always obviously totally consistent with what we believed. It was an effort to use trade as the lever to force workers' rights issues in other countries. It has unfortunately never been as successful as its potential, because the U.S. Government has never been willing to go the full distance on it. Whether that's good pragmatic politics or good economics, I'm not going to make that case. I don't believe it's either, obviously. I believe it is good politics and would be good economics to force worker rights issues all around the world and to use every lever you have to do that. So on the trade side, the Federation, probably up to 1978 or 1979, had been one of the largest exponents in the United States of a free trade policy. In 1978-1979 we despaired of ever seeing anything that could fairly be described as “free trade,” and recognizing the disadvantage that we had in the world, we then moved to what we called a “fair trade” policy and argued for fair trade, which, in more modern discussion, is “reciprocal trade.” Fair trade was the shorthand in those years. And with that, when we began to develop ideas about fair trade, we began at the same time to say that all trade negotiations should be conditioned upon workers' rights being respected in the country of the trading partner. We were quite successful in Congress in writing that into legislation as early as 1982, and in instructing negotiators that it was a primary objective of the United States Government in trade negotiations to ensure that workers' rights were protected. But there's many a slip between the Congressional declaration of intent or an instruction to the negotiators and the final trade agreement. And, as you well know, workers' rights have not gone very well in trade negotiations.

In the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] case, which was the most celebrated one of those years, we argued that workers' rights were an indispensable element of a trade agreement. Rudy Oswald, who was then the Director of Research in the AFL-CIO, and I went to Punta del Este for the opening meeting of the Uruguay Round. We were both members of the advisory committee on trade negotiations and both members

of the labor advisory committee as well, and we went to Punta del Este to ensure that the then U.S. Trade Representative, Clayton Yeutter, and the American delegation, pressed on this subject and wanted it made a principal negotiating item. We talked to a number of delegates and trade ministers there, and I was forced to the depths of my pessimism on the subject when the Australian Trade Minister representing the Labor Government of Australia told us that he had no instructions from his government on this point, and when we communicated back through Washington to Australia to try to get him a set of instructions to that effect, we could not get them. So even the Australians, who should have been our most natural ally in this fight, did not support us. Lane personally called Bob Hawke and nothing availed. The Swedes, who had been the principal proponents of workers' rights in the Tokyo round, walked away from this issue totally.

Anyway, Rudy and I went on for the next six or seven years flogging workers' rights issues in the GATT round and got very little for it. Every time we got to a ministerial meeting, we just could not get any support from other nations for it. The coalition, particularly of Third World nations, led by the Indians and the Brazilians, just shut us down every time. The Indians were concerned about the child labor issue, which they always said was a family labor issue, and the Brazilians, I guess, were concerned about their leadership role in the Third World.

Having not done very well in the GATT negotiations, when NAFTA came along, we argued that this was a perfect opportunity for the assertion of the need for a workers' rights clause. And it was one of the test issues for Bill Clinton in the campaign. We pressed him very hard to come out and to say that he would not accept the agreement as it had been negotiated because of the absence of a workers' rights provision. He found a compromise; he found a middle ground on that. I remember he called me in October from North Carolina, when he was campaigning, and said that he was going to make a speech the next day and wanted us to know that he was going to call for the negotiation of “side agreements.” I told him that was not good enough; that was not what we wanted; and that in order to be effective, workers' rights have to be in the trade agreement. They have to be

central to the agreement; they can't be side issues. In any case, that was his position, and we knew it when we continued to support him in the election. So when he came to office, it was no surprise. I think the then-trade negotiator Mickey Kantor did the best job he could to negotiate a side agreement on the environmental issues and on workers' rights issues. But on the workers' rights' side, it's essentially an agreement that we will each promise to enforce our own laws, whatever they are and however effective or ineffective they are. And we have quite different concepts of enforcing laws than the Mexicans have.

Kienzle: So it really was a disappointment that more could not have been done?

DONAHUE: Yes. And in the GATT, through Marrakech, we were still trying and arguing with the then new General Secretary of the GATT, the Irishman, whatever his name was, who was then the General Secretary. We were hoping that he would improve the position and do something for us on workers' rights. We had moved from it being a principal negotiating subject down to it being the subject of a working party, down to a couple of experts, down to whatever the minimal expression could have been, and we never even got that. What we got was a referral of the issue to the World Trade Organization, and since then they have continued to kick it around. At the last ministerial in Singapore, there was an expression from the Singapore ministerial meeting that they would continue to examine workers' rights in trade or something to that effect. It's about an inch of progress on a mile-long road.

Kienzle: Did you feel that President Clinton backtracked on earlier commitments?

DONAHUE: No, because he told us where he was. The commitment we sought was on NAFTA and he said, “I won't give you that. I will promise to negotiate side agreements.” We said that was not enough, but that's how it came out. On the GATT, I truly believe that Mickey Kantor and Carla Hills and Clayton Yeutter before her all tried hard to negotiate for worker rights, but they were confronted with the uniform opposition in the rest of the world.

By the time we got to Marrakech, we had some glimmers of support from the European Community and from the Swedes, but they were rather fleeting glimmers of hope.

Shea: You did not get much support from the Mexicans and Don Fidel Velasquez, [the long time head of the Mexican Confederation of Labor (CTM)]?

DONAHUE: Not at all. Well, the Mexicans were absolutely opposed to the insertion of workers' rights in the GATT. They were one of the leaders in the opposition. Don Fidel has never been able to influence the government in those regards. Don Fidel, on the other hand, does not believe in free trade. Don Fidel told me in 1993 or so that he still thought it was a mistake that Mexico even went into the GATT in 1986, because he believed workers were disadvantaged. And in the negotiating of the NAFTA, we agreed to disagree. We tried to make common cause. I went to see Don Fidel probably three times about the NAFTA, and we finally agreed that we would each represent our own members and each take his best hold and do what we could do with our governments. He, by that time, had been convinced by the PRI [Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the long time ruling party in Mexico] or by those around him, that the NAFTA was beneficial to his people, so he was quite supportive of it. We did not think it was beneficial to U.S. workers, so we rejected it.

Kienzle: Did you generally concur with the efforts of Congressman Pease to add labor conditionality to the GSP process?

DONAHUE: Yes. I should have mentioned that we supported efforts at conditionality in GSP from the earliest time, which I guess date back to 1982 or so. I remember that we were making submissions as early as 1985, 1986, and 1987 to the interagency committee on which countries should be denied GSP privileges because of violations. That was never a happy experience, though, either in a Republican or a Democratic administration. We were successful in getting the government to deny GSP to only the most flagrant violators where their flagrant violations coincided with their bad politics or their conflict with U.S. politics. So the U.S. cited Nicaragua; we cited Chile at one time; we cited the

Central African Republic; and I guess Paraguay at one time. But that was about it. So unfortunately I think that conditionality or the denial of GSP benefits could have been used much more effectively than it has been used, but there was great timidity in successive administrations to use it. Kienzle: At least it puts the issue in the public light.

DONAHUE: Yes, it did do that. It forced people to address the issue. Even in the U.S. among people who were generally involved in the GSP process, I don't think we appreciated sufficiently the good that the examination of countries' eligibility for GSP was doing. Labor did not get many countries pushed off the list, but the examination itself was helpful. I think that was particularly clear in the case of Taiwan, where the AFL-CIO at one point supported efforts to deny GSP benefits to Taiwan. The Taiwanese were very upset with us over it, but it was at a time when they were unpopular in the U.S. press for their denials of democracy, and they certainly reacted to that pressure. I think you could cite a half dozen examples of countries which were at least challenged in the process and which reacted to that challenge and cleaned up their act a little bit.

Kienzle: It's not a GSP country, but China has MFN or “Most Favored Nation” benefits. Has that been a serious issue with the AFL-CIO?

DONAHUE: We have been opposed to the granting of MFN benefits to China through all of the years and continue to oppose it. I guess there is a fair argument about the blunt nature of the denial of MFN, and whether because of its very bluntness, we will ever deny MFN benefits to anybody. That being the case, the current argument that is being made for a more sophisticated approach to the MFN issue may well be a valid argument. Every administration has found a reason to grant MFN to China in the face of the most horrendous testimony and information about the abuse not just of workers' rights but political rights, the jailing of dissidents and their punishment. The carrying out of that policy [with regard to] well-known dissidents in China particularly is almost like spitting in the face of the U.S. And yet every administration finds a reason to fuzz up the issue. I guess the same is true on the drug enforcement issue as to whether or not Mexico and the other

nations are making a sufficient effort against drugs. We will always find a reason to say, “Well, it looks like they are, so we will keep watching them for another year.” It may be that those blunt instruments are just too blunt for us to manage in this political climate and that you have to find more sophisticated measures by which you can pressure other countries without taking the ultimate penalty against them, whether it's a sanctions argument or MFN.

Kienzle: Do you have any proposals on alternative ways?

DONAHUE: No, I don't. I think that the people who are currently in charge will have to figure those things out.

Kienzle: I would like to go back to the period before the collapse of the Soviet Union. When I was in West Germany, the German trade unionists were playing footsies with the Communists in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and I'm sure that the AFL-CIO must have had a lot of heartburn when the DGB [German Confederation of Labor] tried to develop bridges. Could you describe AFL-CIO relations with the DGB?

DONAHUE: The heartburn? Those romances, if you will, or the reaching out of some national centers to Communist-dominated state organizations was the subject of conflict between the AFL-CIO and other national centers for many, many years. They were always the subject of very spirited exchanges. I have seen Meany take somebody's hide off arguing that issue and Kirkland do the same, because we were people who were frank with one another about our beliefs and our view of the impropriety of dealing with the state unions in those countries. But that was always the problem in the ICFTU, and it continues to be the problem in the ICFTU in terms of the former Soviet Union, certainly with respect to the Russian unions today. Are they reformed? Since they're no longer the creatures of the state, are they now to be called “free and democratic trade unions,” or what are they? We don't believe so, and the Federation has looked askance at admitting to membership those “former Communist unions.” That's been the subject of some controversy within the

ICFTU. I think it will be less so in the future. For one thing, the issue has gotten narrower. And I don't think the current administration of the AFL-CIO will be inclined to raise those issues with quite the same force as they have been raised in the past. But I have always believed that—people were saying it so often this morning about Shanker—that these were men who had certain basic principles and they stuck to them no matter how painful it got to be.

The story that was not told this morning of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike was that when the AFT or the UFT struck in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, they struck a black district school board, which had ordered the removal or fired 13 teachers without regard to the union contract or processes. Shanker had been trying to work with this school district and up to that time, they had been working out problems. Then they decided to fire 13 people and at that point, the union went on strike. My wife tells the story - she then worked for Bayard Rustin and Rustin was very close to Al Shanker and was a consultant and adviser on this issue - one day they said, “Al, you have to tell Phil Randolph about this, because Mr. Randolph has to know what's going on here.” So Al Shanker went to see Phil Randolph, who was the much revered grand old man at that point, and said, “Mr. Randolph, you know we're striking this black school district because they fired 13 teachers without regard to due process.” And Phil Randolph, in this great mellifluous voice, said, “What is the problem, Al? What else would you do?” It didn't matter to him whether it appeared to be a great white-black fight or an argument about control of the schools. The issue to Randolph was a simple one: Were the workers being treated the way they should have been treated. If they weren't, it was up the union to redress that and it did so. So he supported the strike. Similarly for Meany, for Kirkland, and I hope always for myself, those issues were always fairly clear. Either you stand on the side of democratic forces or you don't. And you have to have some standard by which to judge whether something is a free and democratic trade union or it's not. And if it is run by people who used to be the principle operators of the Communist system and were agents of the state for a lot of years and they are still the

people in charge, then I don't know what you call it—but it's the old story that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck!

Shea: And the AFL-CIO was always very consistent with the unions on the right, like the Spanish unions under Franco.

DONAHUE: Absolutely! I just hope that the Federation will always be clear on those issues. That does cause heartburn in Europe. The European unions, not alone the Germans but a lot of others, maybe because they live next door, have a different cultural attitude towards these people. They rationalize [their actions] on the basis that, “We will take them in and then they will be converted later.” Well, that's another approach. It was not ours, but it's another approach.

Shea: They always used to tell me that even though the state unions are not free of government interference, they provide a useful service for such things as occupational safety and things like that.

DONAHUE: Meany always used to express the worry he felt about our associating in any way with those unions by saying, “What are the prisoners going to think of you if you're hanging out with their jailers?”

Kienzle: What are the Chinese going to think of us in fifty years?

DONAHUE: I don't know. I really think that China is a terrible, terrible conundrum for everybody nowadays, but I don't see us standing up as we ought to or proclaiming our dedication to human rights quite as strongly and clearly as we should.

Kienzle: Can you comment on the U.S. Government's decision to reduce funding to the labor assistance institutes and its impact on labor's role in the world?

DONAHUE: Yes, I think it is a tragedy. I think that the best hope that we have in the world is to strengthen democratic institutions. I keep referring back, and I'm sorry to do that,

to that memorial service this morning, but Shanker was quoted in the film as making the point that the fall of totalitarianism does not create democracy. I think it's a delusion to believe that just because there are no longer dictators in X number of states or that the Communist system has died that democracy will flourish. It won't. It needs to be assisted and supported in every possible way. The critical element of democracy, we all believe, is a free trade union movement, the critical measure of democracy. The thought that Congress keeps incessantly cutting back on aid programs, in my opinion, is a very short-sighted view. It confuses short-term savings with what are long-term gains. I believe it is impossible to demonstrate that $100,000 or $250,000, whatever it is, invested in an assistance program to a trade union in a developing country is going to produce X result in two or three years. You just can't do that. I used to argue in the trade union movement the benefits of education. I used to always argue that the benefits of education were real only if it was continuing. If a union wanted to do a quick fix and try to educate its members or its leadership about some issue, it was not going to have much success. They had to stay with it a very long time. I used to always cite the successes that two or three of our unions had with the Harvard Trade Union Program, which was a 10-week program for mid-level leadership.

Shea: Don Kienzle is a graduate of that program.

Kienzle: Yes, I am.

DONAHUE: Oh, is that right. Well, there were two or three of our unions that over the years kept at that program and wound up with executive boards of people every one of whom had been through the Harvard program. The Iron Workers come to mind most principally, but there were two or three others. Similarly, I think Congress is taking a short-sighted view in cutting funds for labor programs and other assistance programs [on the basis of] “What are they going to do for us in the next year or two?” They're not going to do a lot. But over time, if we create and strengthen a free trade union movement, if we create and strengthen a decent teaching corps that is imbued with democratic values,

we are going to have a whole lot more effective ally or prospective ally in that country than we would have otherwise. There's a fascination now with the view that either these things don't need to be done or that governmental agencies or instrumentalities can do them better, so that instead of the government looking as we did in the past to a grant program in the labor area which said to an organization like the African American Labor Center or the American Institute for Labor Development, “Here is X millions of dollars to be distributed among your projects. We want to know what you are doing with it, how you're spending it. We want to have a voice in approving that.” Instead of that, we are now developing a mentality in which AID, for example, is saying, “We can administer those programs better than that prime grantee can, and we will give contracts to this subcontractor or that subcontractor to carry out the same kind of programs.” Well, in the labor area at least, it just can't be done. Maybe it can be done in the agricultural area, I don't know. I don't know farmers that well. But I know that what you need in a labor assistance program abroad is the bona fides of the deliverer of the services. He can't be some contractor from Weehauken [New Jersey] or someplace who is an expert in delivering this and filling out the proper forms. He has to be somebody who comes and is able to signify that he is a trade unionist. There is a bond of solidarity. He or she must come with an experience or background in the United States or other countries, which enables them to relate to the trade unionists in those countries and enables the trade unionist in the receiving country to accept what's being given and to accept training and advice or assistance in whatever form. So I feel badly that the Congressional appropriations are continually being cut and feel badly that many of the agencies which administer what's left have decided that they can do a better job themselves and they will spend the money somehow differently.

Kienzle: Do you think the Clinton Administration fought hard enough to maintain these programs? Or is that as loaded question?

DONAHUE: I think that in the current climate it's very hard to defend spending abroad when you're cutting spending so much in the United States. So I think that once we begin

to acquiesce in the idea of a limited budget, then it's a slippery slope. Once you say, “Well, we can cut spending on welfare because we don't have a lot of money available and we can't raise taxes; therefore, we're going to cut programs; we're going to cut welfare, Medicare, Medicaid, whatever domestic programs,” then I guess it naturally follows that you say, “We also have to cut international programs.” I don't know if anybody can fight hard enough for a particular program; it's all a piece of the same disease, and the disease is the belief that you can run government on the cheap, that you never have to raise taxes; you can always cut them; and you will somehow produce a balanced budget. You can't do all those things.

Kienzle: The Labor Attach# Corps is suffering the same kind of problem.

DONAHUE: Yes. And think of what is being lost by that. Think that the political officer in a country who is attuned to the political movements in that country does not any longer have the input of a labor attach# who can tell him what's going on at the next level down, at the people level of the trade union movement, and who can keep him informed of political movement in the trade union area. I suppose cultural attach#s may well claim the same. But I just think the political attach# is being robbed just as much as the labor movement is being deprived of service. The political officers' reporting has to suffer.

Kienzle: So you understand the lessons of our booklet, “The Historical Lessons of Labor Diplomacy” before you have read it!

DONAHUE: I have talked to a lot of ambassadors around the world. I have been privileged to. They always have a certain sense of the country, which is appropriate to their position, but they don't necessarily always understand what's going on at lower levels, among the workers in that country.

Kienzle: Part of the input should be from the grassroots and how the democratic process is going.

DONAHUE: I remember being in a country, maybe five years ago or six years ago, in which one of the big issues was agrarian policy and a force contending for power in the elections was saying, in short, that they were going to be responsive to the big landowners. And the ambassador believed that the country had to have big land holdings in order to have truly competitive, productive agriculture, without understanding there are other values besides the economic good health of the agricultural industry. There are family values; there are political attitudes that are tied up with that question. I think this ambassador suffered from that [limited perspective] because he had nobody telling him [about the other values]. He had nobody who understood the trade union area or nobody who told him what the agrarian workers were thinking about and how they were going to be affected by these policies. I don't mean ever to put ambassadors down. I think they're for the most part very smart and talented people, but I think they need support. And I think they need the support of a labor attach#.

Kienzle: For the input on what the grassroots will support.

DONAHUE: Yes. I don't think there should be any country in the world where there is a labor movement of any size or importance where we should not have a labor attach# in our embassy who is plugged into that labor movement and who knows what's going on within that labor movement and knows its political attitudes. Because that's a very important part of what the political officer ought to be reporting.

Kienzle: And supporting the local labor assistance institute people and working in parallel.

DONAHUE: Yes, indeed.

Kienzle: Well, you have been very generous with your time. Are there any final observations that you would like to leave with us?

DONAHUE: No, I don't think so, Don. I think we have talked about a lot of things, and I have enjoyed doing it.

Kienzle: Thank you very much for letting us interview you.

Shea: I can't tell you how much we appreciate it.

Kienzle: It's been very informative.

End of interview